The retreating state: political geographies of the object and the proliferation of space

In their article, "Political geographies of the object," Meehan et al. (2013) introduce and explore some of the implications of object-oriented ontology (OOO) for political geography. Their analysis uses *The Wire* – a television drama about the legitimate and illegitimate forces affecting drug trade and policing in Baltimore – to consider how objects such as wiretaps, cameras and standardized tests affect power. Their theoretical aim is to move political geography power beyond textual/discursive examinations of the state or those focusing on material/social relations. To do so, the author's appeal to OOO, which is gaining momentum in several fields beyond its originating home in continental philosophy. The implications of OOO are intriguing. So too are the problems. Particularly, as this commentary identifies, what approaching the state as an object implies – a question left untouched in Meehan et al.'s provocative piece. I raise this problem because OOO requires approaching the state as a real object and this contrasts with political geographies that aim to avoid reifying the spatial extension of the state (i.e. territory) or its abstract relations. I begin with an overview of OOO that situates Meehan et al.'s arguments.

OOO

As Meehan et al. detail, a central claim of OOO is that thinking about "being" has been constrained, at least since Kant, to human *access* to reality. This access is itself conditioned by the gap between our experience of things (*phenomena*) and things-in-themselves (*noumena*). Of course, the Kantian view of the subject-world relationship has been challenged before. Hegel argued that, if Kant's *a priori* concepts of the subject were contingent we could have different

'worlds' whenever we had different conceptual frameworks. Pragmatists such as Rorty (1972) have argued that, if our view of 'the world' refers only to the ways that the *a priori* concepts of the subject represent the sensory data of experience, then this is a view of the world we would do well to lose. Others, such as Foucault, argued we could do without the "knowing subject" while a number of geographers have sought non-representational views of politics, space and the subject (i.e. Thrift, 2008). So the attempt to do without Kant's subject-object 'world' is not unique. What is peculiar to OOO is that it adheres to ontological realism where direct access to the 'world' is abandoned as the aim of the social or natural sciences (Harman, 2013). For OOO, the Kantian gap between phenomenon and thing is the starting point for an inadequate yet pervasive view termed correlationism: the view that because we only have access to phenomena we cannot even *think* about noumena, or being itself, because to do so is to already situate 'being' within human thought and to construe it in terms of the correlation of the subject to the world.

For OOO, knowledge of reality is always indirect while claims to truth are allusive (Harman, 2013). This is a claim defended by Graham Harman – whom Meehan et al. cite extensively – based on the view that the Kantian gap between phenomenon and thing is not unique to the human subject but is, rather, a general condition of all objects. So just as I do not experience the raindrop falling on my head as *noumena*, neither does the chair experience the floor, or bread experience butter, and so on. In this way, spaces proliferate between objects outside of the subject-world correlation. This move is designed to enable speculation about what exists without requiring what exists to travel the road between thought and being. Likewise, the truth is rendered allusive by virtue of the fact that the more we learn about things like photons, elephants or water, the more we see the gap between phenomenon and thing opening up not only

between ourselves and these objects, but between these objects and every other object they encounter (Harman, 2013). In this way, objects are always in a sort of retreat. And this troubles accounts that would reduce the state to material relationships, so we might expect Meehan et al. to engage directly with the state *qua* object. Yet this is not done despite the resources in OOO, such as Harman's (2010) arguments against two variants of materialism; one that posits more basic qualities that objects reduce to and another that sees objects as concealed by power structures or ideologies too powerful to be overcome and which must be radicalized (often dialectically) from within.

Meehan et al. do capture an important feature of OOO wherein objects are irreducible to other objects or to their own qualities. Such is the case because objects are characterized by the manifold and often weird spaces that exist outside the subject-world correlation. Harman (2011) further suggests that when objects encounter each other a new object is formed out of the relational space established between them. This is the case because relations themselves are also objects and, hence, affect the objects that encounter *that* newly established relation. In OOO, these relations obtain between every object that can affect another, and so extend even to fictional objects. Moving from these considerations, Meehan et al. characterize objects as "*force*-full" by virtue of the fact that objects experience these strange new spaces in ways that affect other objects. And their analysis of *The Wire* asks us to consider some of the 'force-relations' that appertain outside of the subject-world correlation and even to *The Wire* itself as a fictional object. But they do not consider the state *qua* object. Rather, their analysis asks us to consider how objects like standardized school tests create different spaces between the test (qua object) and, respectively, the students, teachers, administrators and even university researchers studying

public schools. And, further, how when *those* respective relations are encountered a new suite of real objects comes into view. For instance, an ex-police officer (Bunny) serving as a facilitator for a university study of public schooling remarks that the standardized test produces particular relations amongst students and causes a sort of (often defiant) retreat from the relations between the tests and other objects, such as the relations between the test and school administrators or the test and the expectations of teachers (Meehan et al., p. 7).

THE STATE AS OBJECT

The view of Meehan et al. holds important implications for political geographies of the 'state' that appeal to networks, assemblages, materialism, discourse or social relations. Their analysis suggests that the objects of state power – such as cameras or other techniques of surveillance – are establishing new objects of control through the relations they establish with, in this case, other objects in the drug trade (i.e. gangs). Thus, OOO is not merely orienting political geography to a new way of revealing how the state uses its power to gaze upon previously inaccessible spaces. Rather, the state is encountering the power produced by new relations amongst objects as wiretaps, cameras and the like are reworked into not only the fictional world of *The Wire* but also, as Meehan et al. suggest, into juridical concepts, such as surveillance. But this also raises a fundamental problem for political geography: Is the state an object? If so, how should we think about state space?

From the perspective of OOO, the 'state' is undoubtedly a real object, just as are fictional characters, carrots or anything else that affects another object. Moreover, the state affects other

objects and proliferates new spaces through its encounters. Interestingly, Meehan et al. do not consider the implications of the state as a real object even though the appeal to OOO provocatively raises a tension between their arguments and multiple traditions of political geography. For instance, efforts to avoid the 'territorial trap' often critique the reification of state space or the ways juridical concepts of territory are entrenched as constitutive norms in thinking about the state or its relations (i.e. Shah, 2012). Likewise, the notion that objects are always in retreat troubles analyses that identify how our "experience of the state" moves from the abstract to the concrete through material, technological or ideological contingencies (i.e. Rudolph and Jacobsen, 2006). Yet to remain consistent with OOO, we must treat the state as a real object that is not reducible to other relations, constituent parts or qualities. Moreover, we must also see the state as in a sort of retreat as the gap between phenomenon and thing is generalized across its encounters with other objects. Yet it is not clear that Meehan et al. (p. 8) have this sort of treatment in mind when they state: "What we call state power is constitutive of an ontological equilibrium, a decisive policing of things that blocks the contingencies of the world." There seems, rather, to be a discrepancy. For it is difficult to see how state power (*qua* object) blocks many of the contingencies that OOO asks us to consider.

For instance, if the gap between phenomenon and thing is a general condition for objects then the tasks of political geography (using OOO) not only include addressing the mediating objects of state power, but also to speculate about objects that are producing new relations – relations that, within OOO, are themselves also objects – that affect the state as a real object. Here it is interesting that the objects Meehan et al. choose (cameras, wiretaps, tests) are explicit *mediums* that are manipulated precisely to gain access into other objects, such as gangs, by

producing new objects such as pictures or recordings as well producing legal relations between the state and those objects. By choosing these mediums we get a sense of how objects are affected by the power of the state and how it gathers contingencies in attempts at equilibrium. And yet it would seem that, in *The Wire*, one of the most obvious candidates for an analysis of objects are the drugs being traded, stolen, used, confiscated or, in one season, okayed by the police in limited fashion. The drugs, *qua* object, have a contingency that remains unbounded by the state and are never in equilibrium with it. In fact, a reasonable interpretation of *The Wire* as a tragedy is that neither the state systems of policing (or education) nor the illicit gangs of Baltimore can evade or even fully understand the power that drugs *qua* objects have on political space – often repeated in tautological form throughout *The Wire,* as "the game is the game." Here, the contingencies of the world are far from blocked by state power, as evidenced by the fact that the force of drugs continue to persist in ways far from equilibrium with the state or from a 'world' in equilibrium with the sorts of political spaces the state (or gangs for that matter) tries to police into existence.

To conclude, Meehan et al. have provided an interesting introduction to OOO and raised a novel, if troublesome prospect for political geography and understandings of the state. In OOO, the state is a real object that exists amidst the spaces that proliferate between objects. This view challenges approaches to political geography that seek to avoid reifying state space as a unit of analysis and, for Meehan et al., suggest questions remain regarding how to approach the state as a real and retreating object.

References

Harman, G. (2010). I am also of the opinion that materialism must be destroyed. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *28*, 772-790.

Harman, G. (2011). *The quadruple object.* Washington DC: Zero Books.

Harman, G. (2013). An outline of object-oriented philosophy. *Science Progress, 96(2)*, 187-199.

Meehan, K., Shaw, I.G.R., & Marston, S.A. (2013). Political geographies of the object. *Political Geography, 33*, 1-10.

Rorty, R. (1972). The world well lost. *Journal of Philosophy*, *69*, 649-665.

Rudolph, L., & Jacobsen, J. (Eds.) (2006). *Experiencing the State.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shah, N. (2012). The territorial trap of the territorial trap: global transformation and the problem of the state's two territories. *International Political Sociology, 2*(1), 57-76.

Thrift, N. (2008). *Non-representational theory: space, politics, affect.* New York: Routledge.